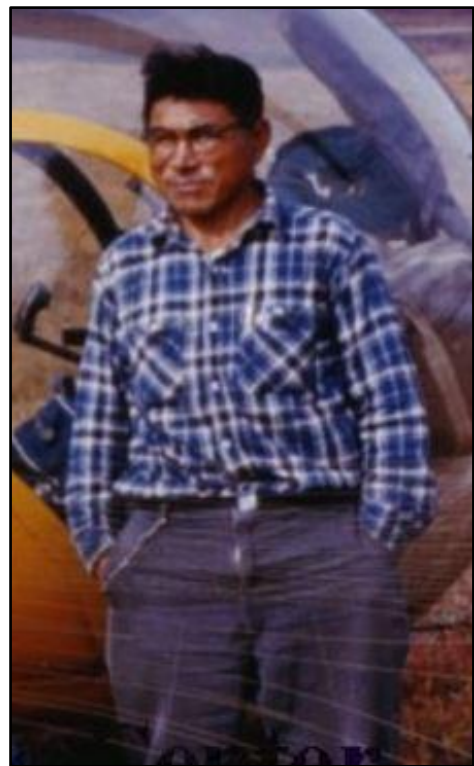


# Homer Mekiana

*Iñupiat Community Leader, Census Enumerator*



Homer in the early 1950's.  
North Slope Borough Iñupiat Heritage Center - Archives  
& Collections, Samuel Simmonds Collection, SS007

Homer Mekiana was born on May 5, 1904 to the Teremiut Iñupiat of Utqiagvik, then known as Barrow, Alaska. Homer attended six years of schooling at the Bureau of Indian Affairs school, before departing Barrow in 1920. These six years of schooling would provide Homer with vital reading, writing, and language skills that proved valuable later in his life. In the early 1920s, Homer married Amilla, with whom he had several children, and worked as a trapper.



Header for Homer's newspaper column.  
Fairbanks Daily News-Miner (Fairbanks, AS) March 13, 1965

From the beginning, the United States vacillated on how to enumerate American Indians. The U.S. Constitution specifically excluded “Indians not taxed” (defined as those living in tribal relations as part of a sovereign community) from the census count. However, the federal government soon recognized that they would have to count the American Indian population, even if the numbers were not part of the apportionment decisions. In 1850, the United States began sporadically conducting separate censuses for these communities, a practice that continued for almost 100 years. In 1860, for the first time, American Indians not living on tribal lands had their own racial category on the census. The 1880 Census contained the first full count of Alaska Natives, while the 1900 Census was the first to count and classify all Indians living in the United States, regardless of their status. Throughout the evolution of the enumeration of American Indians and Alaskan Natives, census officials have embraced the hiring of a diverse workforce representative of the local communities.

Homer's 1940 Census

Following the passing of his first wife during childbirth, Homer married Rebecca, a young Nunamiut Iñupiat widow, in 1949. Unlike the Teremiut, who relied on the sea, the Nunamiut lived semi-nomadic lives following the caribou herds. In 1949, Homer and his family moved to the Anaktuvuk Pass area, where the caribou concentrated to pass between mountains. Homer and his relative, Simon Paneak, were two of the only locals who who could read, write, and speak English, and they quickly found themselves in leadership roles. When the government announced the dates for the 1950 Census, Simon reached out to the census office in Fairbanks to coordinate, and Homer met the enumerator, Ethel Ross Oliver, when she arrived by plane.



**Homer getting ready to conduct the census.**  
*Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* (Fairbanks, AS) March 31, 1960

In addition to translating for Ethel, Homer and Simon took her to the various remote camps, and also helped provide food, housing, and necessary equipment like parkas, socks, and mittens. The first census of Anaktuvuk Pass took three days and counted a population of 66 spread out over several camps.

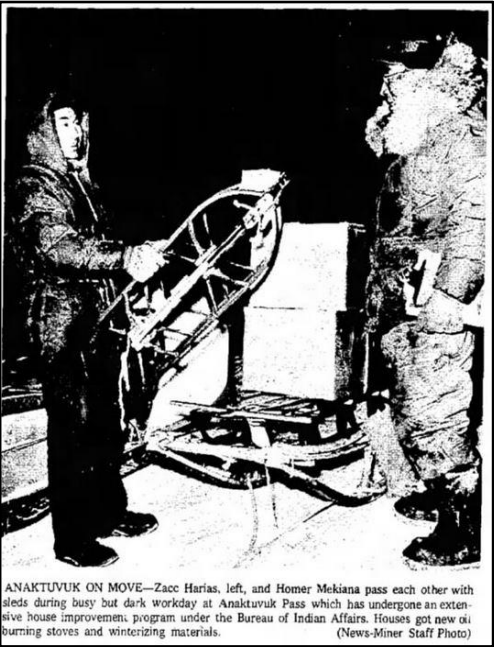
Following the 1950 Census, Homer continued in government service when he received an appointment as the community postmaster in 1951, a position he would hold for the rest of his life. Homer’s post-office was notable because it had no permanent location, but moved along with the village to follow the caribou. As one of the only literate people in the village during the early days, Homer also helped his neighbors to write and read letters and place orders with the Sears

catalogue. In addition to his work as postmaster, Homer held several other jobs, including weather observer, fish and game licensing agent, and welfare agent.

In 1960, Homer once again helped conduct the census—the first after Alaska gained statehood in 1959—this time as official enumerator. Although the rest of the country experimented with self-enumeration through Advanced Census Reports that were sent by mail, filled out by families, and then returned to enumerators, much of the census in Alaska was still conducted by enumerator visits similar to earlier censuses due to the remote settlements, rugged terrain, and fierce weather. Homer only counted a population of 35 in 1960, although the drop in population represented the increased mobility of village residents who began travelling in the spring for school or trading, rather than a true population decline. Every census of Anaktuvuk Pass since 1960 has shown significant population increases, with a population of 324 in the 2010 Census.



**Homer, left, at a postmasters convention.**  
*Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* (Fairbanks, AS) May 29, 1967



**Homer, right, at work in 1967.**  
*Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* (Fairbanks, AS)  
 December 9, 1967

Homer also recorded daily village life through his newspaper column “Anaktuvuk Passages” for the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, and through his extensive journal taking. Several researchers, like W.C. Hanson of Los Alamos and anthropologist Margaret B. Blackman, utilized Homer’s journals as valuable resources for demographic and economic information, which they noted was similar to the information collected by the census. Starting in 2005, the Census Bureau began collecting similar information every year, as opposed to every ten years, when it introduced the American Community Survey, which replaced the long-form questionnaire previously sent to only a percentage of houses as part of the decennial census.

In addition to his extensive service to the people of Anaktuvuk Pass as a representative of the government and community leader, Homer also served as an elder in the Presbyterian Church. Homer passed away on December 24, 1967, survived by a large family. The Census Bureau is thankful for Homer’s contributions to our nation and his community.